

# EMPIRES OF THE VELD

BEING

FRAGMENTS OF UNWRITTEN HISTORY OF THE  
TWO LATE BOER REPUBLICS, WITH  
OTHER PAPERS FOR THE MOST PART DESCRIPTIVE  
OF THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF THE  
PEOPLE.

BY

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## THE UNICORN.

The majority of white inhabitants in South Africa held, and possibly hold to the present day, that such an animal used to exist, as its fac-simile is to be seen on the English national coat-of-arms. A popular legend has it that the Crown once offered £40,000 for a living specimen. I never saw this confirmed in print, perhaps owing to the irregularity of the "Government Gazette" coming to hand in the early days.

In 1860, the Natal public discussed the feasibility of hunting up the said animal. I was there at the time, and remember very well the pros and cons on the subject.

The arguments in favour were:—

1. Sketches of the unicorn are to be found in many caves and on rocks in South Africa, especially in the Cape Colony, together with pictures of other living and known animals, drawn by Bushmen.

2. A Zulu in the service of Mr. A. Osborn, a Natal Colonist, told his employer that he, in company with five other kafirs, had explored the plateau of the Drakensberg proper, where they had come to a swamp of the extent of one day's travelling,\* and there and then found six animals of dark-brown colour

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\*In February, 1868, during the Basuto war, a strong column of the Free State Army patrolled the said plateau, which before that time had been *terra incognita* to white people and discovered such a swamp (or vley), but no unicorns.

about the size of a blesbok, having a long tail, with a long, straight horn on the head. They proved to be of a very ferocious nature, as they attacked at once, with the result that his five mates were killed, and he only survived by scaling a rock which luckily happened to be within reach.

3. A Basuto in the service of Daniel Bezuidenhout, then living in the district of Bethlehem (who died in 1894), had offered to show his master (for a cow and calf as remuneration) a kind of animal on the Drakensberg, which he described as the Zulu had done, adding that it was so fierce as to attack its own shadow! The said Bezuidenhout, who visited Natal every year for trading purposes, had communicated these particulars.

4. As no white man had ever explored the Drakensberg plateau between the sources of the Tugela and Cornetspruit, where the Zulu referred to had located the said swamp, it is just possible that the unicorn thrives there, prevented by its natural shyness from migrating to lower and less lonesome pastures.

The opponents argued as follows:—

1. Supposing the animal existed at one time in South Africa, why has nobody ever found a petrified carcass or even a single bone, as is the case with all other species?

2. None of the black tribes have a name for it in their language.

3. That it is not extinct, like the dodo, mastodon, or mammoth, which have all left evidences of their existence, but is a mere popular fiction like the satyr and the dragon.

4. That the pictures to be found in Bushmen's caves are unsuccessful profile sketches of the rhinoceros.

As the enterprise was not a very costly affair, those in favour of it might have persevered, and taken shares in a Natal Unicorn Company (limited), but for the hostile attitude at that time of the Paramount Chief, Moshesh. The country to be explored, though only occupied by a few Bushmen, was undoubtedly within his domain. It was not approachable from the Natal side, as passes through the Drakensberg were not known at that time. The gap through the mountains, by which the Griqua Chief, Adam Kok, managed to enter Griqualand East, was only discovered at a later period. Hence, the only possible road was up the Namagazi (Elands River) and through Weedsie's Hoek. From there Basuto guides would have been indispensable; but, considering the unfriendly feeling of their Chief and the known dread of the tribe for the few Bushmen still to be found on the mountain, the Natalians despaired of procuring a specimen. For these reasons the plan was abandoned.

My humble opinion is that the unicorn never existed in the flesh, and that the sketches on rocks originated from the following event:—

According to historical records, the then Dutch Government sent, at some time in the eighteenth century, two scientists from Capetown northward to explore the interior for geological and zoological purposes. Having passed the region occupied by whites they had to employ Bushmen as guides. As likely as not they were provided with pictures of all known and unknown animals. These were shown to

the servants to explain the errand of their masters, very likely promising extra remuneration for specimens found. The Bushman, being provided with a much-developed bump of imitation, like his cousin, the monkey (according to Darwin), copied them afterwards on rocks, and thereby immortalized them for the instruction and bewilderment of future generations.